THE FINAL ACT

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THE FINAL ACT

by skeletontwins

Summary

After establishing himself as an unsuccessful homicide detective, semi-successful adjunct professor, and successful FBI consultant, Will Graham feels his dark past is finally behind him. However, an old friend reemerges from Will's youth and impedes on Will's ability to supress his memories and trauma. Will Will Graham be able to hold his new life together? Or will he fall apart... and into Hannibal's open arms?

Notes

WOW this fic is darker than I ever anticipated. I highly recommend reading the first three parts of this series first as this Will is extremely shaped by the events of "Italy, 1993". Also, TRIGGER WARNING if you haven't read those first three parts: in this AU, Will and Hannibal had a sexual and romantic relationship when Will was 17 and Hannibal was 24, which is extremely gross and bad. Please filter this fic out as you need.

CHAPTER I

Chapter Notes

> Much apologies to those waiting on Reddie updates. I promise I'm working on it; it's just this fic was haunting me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will Graham is, by all accounts, strange and off-putting.

He had thought the academy would've straightened him out. Instead, it proved to him what he already knew: Will Graham is irrevocably damaged. Something happened to him, a long time ago. But this isn't that story. This is the story of Baltimore, 2013. Will Graham left the academy a long time ago and has been successful as an adjunct professor and part time consultant for the F.B.I. He wakes up every morning and feeds his dogs, mostly chicken and rice, cooked the evening before and refrigerated overnight. He brushes his teeth, rinses his face with cold water and dresses himself in one of his many shabby collared shirts and one of three pairs of slacks, all varying shades of beige. He does nothing to his hair. Sometimes he shaves, but not often enough that he avoids sporting an ungroomed five o'clock shadow. Not that it really matters— what he looks like. Beyond the vague guise of professionalism, no one really expects Will to keep up much in the way of appearances. Will feels a small and perhaps misplaced modicum of gratitude for this little allowance. Small miracles and all that.

Will appreciates a second small miracle: the pleasant, hesitant sunshine, emerging from behind the heavy and persistent cast of clouds. The rain has been good for the river, but too much of it will drown the banks. *At least the Bluegill will be happy,* Will thinks as he knots the lace of his boot. This has been a stubborn rain, all season. Spring seems to be late coming, but Will maintains faith. The one constant throughout the years has been the season's change.

Jesus, Will thinks as he jingles his keys, a signal for the newest addition to the family, Winston, to accompany Will to the car, *when did I become so hokey?* Winston trots happily to the front door, where Will waits, Winston's nails scritching the hardwood floor. Will will have to trim them soon. "Ready for an adventure, bud?" Will asks rhetorically, though Winston's tongue lolling out of his mouth seems to be an affirmative response.

Will takes it as such and swings the door open, letting Winston run out ahead of him and wait excitedly at the car. It's nice, bringing Winston along places. Not to therapy, as it's held at Dr. Du Maurier's house (Will's been to enough damn therapy to know that's unusual), but to class. The students like Winston. When he's teaching smaller lecture halls, he's able to let Winston off-leash to wander around the room and nose at students' palms. For therapy, though, Winston naps in the backseat of the car.

Before Will even really knows it, he's pulling into the driveway of her house, and shifting the car into park. It's probably unsafe to drive so spaced out but, Jesus, Will spends half his life spaced out these days. More than half. He shouldn't tell Dr. Du Maurier that. He shouldn't be in the field, thinking like that. He shouldn't be in the field. It's not that complicated. Will realizes he's sitting in the car staring at nothing. Winston's started whining.

Will takes a deep breath in, holds it, lets it out. He reaches to the backseat and scratches behind Winston's ears, reassures him that he's a good, patient boy. Then, Will gets out of the car. He walks to the front door. He knocks. Today is his last prescribed appointment with Dr. Du Maurier before she draws up her suggestion for the F.B.I. *My name is Will Graham,* Will thinks, unbidden. He shakes his head. *No.* A bright, broadcasted word: *No.* He banishes the thought. *I can do this,* Will thinks instead. And he can. He will. He has to.

The door opens.

Dr. Du Maurier stands tall on the other side, though her height is an illusion as she's still literally shorter than Will, even in her pointy high heels. Dr. Du Maurier smiles politely at Will. It's a tight, reserved smile, but not disingenuous. Will appreciates this, but still avoids her eye. He avoids everyone's eyes. Tricky, in his experience.

Dr. Du Maurier steps to the side and opens the door to allow Will in. He steps through the threshold and hopes it's for the final time. It *is* the last time. Inside, the house is gorgeous, spacious, with wide expanses of floor open. Dr. Du Maurier's heels click against the hardwood as they walk through the house, towards the sitting room where they hold sessions. The room itself is bathed a white sterile sunlight, the sun now fully emerged from behind the clouds. It's always sunnier in Baltimore than it is in Wolf Trap.

Once they're seated in opposing cushy armchairs, Dr. Du Maurier finally asks her opening question, which has not changed in inflection or phrasing since their first session. She asks, "How are you today, Mr. Graham?" She always calls Will, 'Mr. Graham,' though even his students don't call him that. Will supposes it's payback for the fact that he refuses to call her 'Bedelia.' It's a beautiful name. It tastes unfamiliar and bitter in Will's mouth, so he avoids it. Plus, as much as he hates hearing 'Mr. Graham,' (that was what teachers at the boarding school called his father during disciplinary meetings) Will does enjoy the sturdy metaphorical wall it puts up between himself and Dr. Du Maurier. And, it's a ritual. Will loves his rituals.

"I'm…" Will starts, forcing his body to relax in the armchair and making an effort to disconnect the filter that his thoughts pass through on the way to his mouth. The best way to get through therapy, in Will's extensive experience, is to sit there and bleed. "I'm okay," Will says. "I feel… present. I feel connected. Jack is introducing me to a new colleague later today."

Dr. Du Maurier nods. "Are you excited to make a new friend?"

Will frowns. "'Excited' isn't the right word." Really, neither is 'friend.'

"What is?" Dr. Du Maurier prompts.

Will, in the spirit of letting his mouth run, explicates: “I’m curious to meet this new person. I spend so much time with college students. It’ll be interesting, talking to a real adult.” That’s the extent of Will’s interest in Jack’s shiny new toy. That’s Jack’s thing, these days. Picking up young and up-and-coming prodigies. Using them up until they’re husks of who they were before. Will’s seen it a million times, from a million different powerful people. He doesn’t even fault Jack for it. Positions of authority do that to people. Unless you’re careful. “Not that I mind the college kids,” Will thinks to add.

“How *is* work?” Dr. Du Maurier prompts. God, Will will be grateful to go back to his usual life, where the only questions people ask him are related to cadavers. And crime scenes. And murder weapons. Will remembers a case he went over last year— a killer with a stutter and a butcher knife. The students had all the questions. “Will?” Dr. Du Maurier prompts and Will stops thinking about murder weapons.

“The undergraduates are trickier than the doctoral students,” Will says easily, getting into the groove of talking about himself. “Some of them… They’re still squeamish at the sight of blood.” And it’s true. A student actually left Will’s lecture the other day, rushing to the bathroom, green in the gills. Will had faltered in his sentence as he watched the student leave, though he did his best to continue normally for fear of embarrassing the student in question. “I guess I was never like that.”

“Do you find it difficult to empathize with them?” Dr. Du Maurier asks and Will frowns.

“Not necessarily,” Will answers. And he doesn’t. Not really. It’s just that they’re young and naïve, and Will isn’t. Not anymore. “I don’t relate to them. But I understand how they feel.” Will thinks, *I can remember*.

“How do they feel?”

Will closes his eyes. He pictures the faces of his students, one after the other until they begin to blur together, a fusion of youth and tenacity. Brave young people who still believe the world is more good than not. Will remembers being that age, whether he wants to or not. He was… He was small for his age. Only 5’7” and skinny. People often told him, sarcastically, that he looked like he could use a sandwich. He could fire a gun at that age. He had his hunting license. He didn’t go often, though. He was like his students. The blood could quickly turn overwhelming. Quickly, it could look like a gorey scene from a movie, and the knife could grow ten times larger in Will’s hand, his arms soaked with the warm red liquid, the flies beginning to swarm, Will swallows. He clenches his fist. The handle of his knife is slippery with carnage, Will’s a slaughterhouse, he can’t help it, Jesus.

“Mr. Graham?” Dr. Du Maurier’s voice is a whisper in a storm, Will’s too far gone. It’s everywhere. The blood is everywhere. Up to Will’s elbows. “Mr. Graham?” Her voice is firmer this time, but not louder. “Mr. Graham?” She has a strange accent. Western-European, not German… Her voice is too deep, too textured, like velvet Will wants to run his hand across. “Your name is Will Graham,” she says but it isn’t her. It’s… He’s…

“Will!” Dr. Du Maurier snaps her fingers in front of Will’s face and he blinks his eyes open. Dr. Du Maurier is standing, bent over in front of Will and Will, suddenly much too present, averts his eyes. She’s looking right at him, her expression betraying her concern, her…

suspicion. Will refocuses his gaze to the window, to the world outside, he doesn't want to read Dr. Du Maurier in that moment. He doesn't want to see himself through her eyes. Dr. Du Maurier makes a sound like a sigh and when Will looks over at her again, she's retreating to her armchair. She says nothing. Will says nothing. The silence feels oppressive.

Will breaks it. "*Sorry*," he whispers and he sounds exactly 19 years old. Fuck.

A series of microexpressions play out on Dr. Du Maurier's face and Will averts his gaze once again. Will knows that she's smart enough to recognize that there's something deeply wrong with Will, somewhere in his core, but like everybody else, she can't quite pin down the shape of it. Will has no interest in genuinely revealing himself to her. For her own benefit and wellbeing. Will takes a deep breath in, holds, and lets it out. He's alright. Dr. Du Maurier doesn't know anything beyond what she suspects, which can't be much more than that Will's a freakish, aging, stranger. Will doesn't care if she thinks that. There are worse things she could think about him. Will realizes she's speaking to him.

"—discuss what just occurred," she saying.

"No thanks," Will mutters under his breath. He risks a glance at Dr. Du Maurier to see her wearing a cool, neutral expression. "I get…" Will begins at a normal volume, "*lost*... sometimes. I just forget where I am. That's all." *Please drop this,* Will wills her, but she persists.

"You were shaking," she says.

Will looks down at his right hand. He's gripping the armrest of the armchair. "Can we talk about something else?" Will asks frankly. He doesn't care that this is an ungraceful and meandering escape route. He's desperate. "Please?" he asks and it sounds like begging.

Dr. Du Maurier arranges her expression into a pleasant, reserved smile. "Sure," she says coolly. "What would you like to talk about?" she asks.

"There's…" Will scrambles for a new topic; his brain reverts back to what's comfortable: "There's a new serial. String of murders across the D.C. metro line."

"What proved it to be serial?" Dr. Du Maurier asks. Her voice remains restrained, perfectly pleasant.

Will cringes as if her words are sharp as a blade slicing through soft fatty meat. "It hasn't been exactly proved yet," Will says through gritted teeth. Will had omitted the fact that Jack's been fighting him on the serial-front and won't bring Will on as a consultant until homicide proves it to be so. It had slipped Will's mind. He unclenches his jaw. This is not the place to become vulnerable. To be tense is to be *obvious*. "It's more of a hunch," Will lies. It's serial. He knows it's serial.

Dr. Du Maurier smiles, perhaps a touch of earnesty present. "What made you sure?" she asks, and Will takes it in good faith that she's asking only with the appropriate amount of judgment.

“The scenes are all meticulously posed to look like crimes of passion,” Will answers. Jack, at least, let him look at the photos. Even the still images screamed some kind of signature to Will. It was all so obvious to him. The careful, bored procedure of slaughtering, harvesting, posing. “All missing organs,” Will adds. “I’m afraid…” Will begins, getting to his point, but suddenly he’s in Jack’s office looking over the glossy, high resolution prints of the crime scene. There’s a blood splatter across the side of a brick wall pock-marked with an array of varied graffiti tags. There’s the corpse of an unhoused person, his many layers of tattered clothing ripped open to reveal his intestines spilling out of the cavity of his flayed torso. His skin hangs in ragged ribbons around the mess of gore and exposed remaining organs that make up his belly. In his hand is a broken off beer bottle, coated in blood, not his own, that doesn’t belong to any offender on any database. One of his shoes is missing. And his kidneys.

“Afraid of what?” Dr. Du Maurier asks, pulling Will back to the present.

Will looks down at his right hand and is pleased to find it untensed and resting comfortably on the armrest of the armchair. “They slip up,” Will mutters. He looks up and sees Dr. Du Maurier patiently waiting for him to elaborate. There isn’t much to elaborate upon. “They always slip up. This one might not.”

“Mr. Graham,” Dr. Du Maurier begins, and continues, “why do you believe you have been mandated to attend sessions these past six weeks?”

The question catches Will off guard. The answer is too simple. Will knows exactly why he has been mandated to attend these past six weeks of therapy sessions and it’s an ugly story, one that Dr. Du Maurier has heard before, from him. It doesn’t take long to tell, and Will thought it would be best to get it over with early. “I discharged my weapon 11 times into—”

Dr. Du Maurier raises a hand and Will stops.

“I know why the Bureau prescribed these sessions to you.” Will frowns. Dr. Du Maurier continues, “My question related more to your perspective on your progress. How do you feel you’ve forded this river, so to speak? Have you made headway, in your own eyes?” Will looks out the window once again. Dr. Du Maurier’s back yard is flush with greenery, harboring tall, pale Birchs and beautiful flowering bushes. It’s a pleasant thought, Will fording through a river. He imagines himself waist-deep in freshwater, walking against the current.

“I’m more present than ever,” Will answers, having to speak loudly over the sound of the rushing water. “I feel like I’m really living my life, for the first time,” he says, his teeth chattering from the cold. “It’s nice.”

Dr. Du Maurier squints her eyes, just a little bit. “You discharged your weapon 11 times into a suspect—”

“Perpetrator,” Will corrects. The man was convicted posthumously.

“The family claimed they had no option but a closed-casket funeral,” Dr. Du Maurier states plainly. “They threatened to sue the Bureau for $150,000,” she adds. “You admitted during a

lengthy deposition that you were protecting sealed juvenile records and that you've previously struggled with mental health maintenance."

"I complied," Will says, easily. He's said it before.

Dr. Du Maurier nods slightly and continues, "The family only dropped the suit under the condition that you take six weeks of unpaid leave to attend therapy with a qualified professional. Myself." She smiles. "It is my professional opinion that you were not present as you discharged your weapon into the perpetrator, nor are you present in this moment. I'm not sure I've ever seen 'present' from you, Mr. Graham. Have you?"

Will blinks. Dr. Du Maurier's house is before his eyes again and it really is beautifully decorated. "I'm sorry," Will says absently. "What was that?"

Will's jittery for the duration of the lecture held after his last session with Dr. Du Maurier. (She had politely offered to continue seeing him outside the Bureau's recommendation and Will had politely declined.) He's not sure how his evaluation is going to go. Jesus, no, he's sure it's going to go like shit. *Maybe it's a good thing,* Will tells himself as he gestures towards a large projection of six different shoe prints. *I'm not ready for the force. Teaching is more my speed. And it gives me more time with the dogs.* The dogs. Winston whines and Will glances down at him. He gets antsy only when Will's lost track of himself and gone over time. Will's students all seem too polite (or possibly afraid of Will) to ask to leave. Winston's not so much so. Will glances at the clock that hangs on the other side of the room. Yeah, five after. Underneath the clock, in the doorway, stands Jack Crawford, almost obscured by shadow.

Will's stomach doesn't drop, his palms down begin to sweat, but he does feel his eyebrow twitch. "Class dismissed," Will says to the class of undergrads, the room being so small he doesn't need to project. "Apologies for going over," he thinks to add, though he wouldn't usually. The students then pack up and trail out of the room one by one, collectively saying a barely word.

Once the room is empty except for a few stragglers, Jack approaches Will. "Going soft on them this year, I see," Jack says, smiling warmly. Will forces a tight smile in return and risks a glance at Jack's eyes. He's not… Jack isn't angry. Jack looks around, then looks back at Will. He frowns slightly. "Everything alright, Will?" he asks and Will schools whatever expression he's wearing into something more neutral.

"Yes, yeah," Will answers, biting the inside of his cheek. Stopping himself from asking Jack what the hell he wants— if this has something to do with the evaluation. Dr. Du Maurier couldn't have contacted Jack so quickly, right? *Jesus*.

Jack smiles cautiously, as if Will is a wounded animal Jack's hoping to coax back into good health. "Ready for lunch?" Jack asks easily.

Fuck. Fuck! Lunch with Jack's new friend. How could Will have forgotten? He had mentioned it to Dr. Du Maurier earlier this morning. *How could I forget so easily?* Will wonders as he stuffs files and materials into his laptop bag. "Of course," Will answers, his cadence and the pace of his movement too quick so as to reveal his nervousness. "*The Filling Station*, right?" Will asks, cringing at the name. What a stupid name. It almost distracts him from the fact that he panicked for no goddamn reason about Jack's not-so-sudden appearance in Will's classroom. "Yeah, let's head out," Will finishes, zipping his bag.

Jack smiles at Will again. He's smiley today. It must be his new friend. At least he seems too excited to notice Will's obvious disarray. "Wonderful. I truly can't wait for you to meet Lois. The two of you in the same room…" Jack trails off into a hearty chuckle. Will hates when Jack has something up his sleeve. Whoever this Lois-guy is, he can't be good news. Not if Jack likes him this much.

The Filling Station is packed. Will desperately wishes it weren't. The sound of fifty people chewing is something Will hopes to never experience again, but he doubts he'll be able to avoid it. Not if he stays close with Jack and Alana. They love all the trendy-D.C.-bistro-trash that Will can't stand. Speaking of, the waiter has a ridiculously styled hipster-mustache. It almost kills Will's appetite. Jack checks his tiny smartphone as they sit. "Sorry," Jack says, looking up. "Lois just texted me. He's running late. I think a session ran long." Jack smirks like it's an inside joke. "He takes only the most difficult clients," Jack says. "Had he been here two months ago, I would've recommended him for you."

Will scowls. "You sound like Beverly," Will says bitterly. Really, Jack sounds like Zeller, but Will isn't so cruel as to actually say that.

Jack laughs. "Will," he says, "You're my best man," and he means it. "Lois is brilliant. That's what you two have in common." And he means it. That's the best thing about Jack. He's earnest. Even when he lies, which he has, there's also a version of the truth nestled within the falsehood. There's so much of Jack in everything he says. Will smiles at him. It's probably an awkward, strained mess of an expression, but it's earnest. Jack unfolds his utensils from his napkin and places the napkin on his lap. "Why were you so nervous to see me in your class today, Will?" he asks and Will looks down at the place setting and frowns. It's probably a terrible idea to explain to Jack all the minuscia of Will's anxiety about Dr. Du Maurier's prognosis. Jack wants Will as his man, not in homicide. He'd probably be gleeful at the idea that Will's unfit for the force, but just healthy enough to remain banished to consulting.

"I thought—" Will begins, glancing up at Jack but Jack's not looking at him anymore, he's smiling at something he's spotted over Will's shoulder. Will turns around and peers into the bustling crowd of patrons, past the brightly colored t-shirts and polos and khaki of well-dressed families and couples, and sees…

Hannibal Lecter, in all his glory.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly thought I would wait much longer to return to this Will and Hannibal but these two really live in my head and they got annoying. They, despite what they may tell you, were desperate to meet again. And thus— this fic was born a premie! Hope you all enjoyed this beginning. Now we get to the good stuff >:)

CHAPTER II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal looks different, but Will recognizes him immediately, with no trouble at all. He can't help but stare as Jack and Hannibal shake hands, as Hannibal takes his seat. Hannibal is dressed handsomely in a stylish three-piece suit and his hair is longer than it was in the 90's, attractively silver and coiffed perfectly. His face has matured in the past twenty years; deep lines have formed around his eyes and mouth but he wears no tiredness in his expression and carries himself just the same way he did in 1993, perhaps now with even more dignity. His movements are sharp and sure and Will feels exactly 17 years old again, paralyzed by awe. He says nothing as Jack introduces Hannibal ("This is my colleague, Dr. Lois Mort,") as Jack and Hannibal catch up with each other, as the waiter appears. As Winston takes a deep and heartfelt interest in Hannibal, who seems bewildered and pleased by this— guarded but, still… God, Will can still read his microexpressions like a good book. Will orders something but he's not sure what. All he knows is that the sound of his voice surprises him with its gruffness. Will swallows, his mouth suddenly dry and uncomfortable.

Eventually, after Will has skirted Jack's deeply concerned gaze multiple times, Hannibal's polite pass-over-glances just as often, not to mention the concerned nuzzle of Winston's wet nose against Will's palm, Jack excuses himself to the restroom. Before Will's aware that he and Hannibal are alone together (in a restaurant crowded enough that Will can't lunge at Hannibal, going for the throat… *Sly fox,* Will thinks bitterly), Will's opening his mouth to speak, unsure what's going to come out. "What the fuck are you doing here?" is what Will ends up saying, which he takes a split second to internally scoff at. Not that it's a bad question (indeed, what the fuck *is* Hannibal doing in D.C.?), it's just that it's… an oversimplification. It debases the situation. The situation, which is so outlandishly wild, Will swears he's had this nightmare before. Will blinks at Hannibal, who raises a single, invisible eyebrow minutely and, for a split second, looks an awful lot like Dr. Du Maurier. Jack had said that Hannibal (or, "Lois" Jesus fucking Christ) had been practicing psychology the past few years. Jack had said his brilliant colleague had left medicine in a hurry. *I wonder why,* Will thinks humorlessly. *Accidentally kill someone?*

"You're shouting, Will," Hannibal answers easily, his dulcet, melodic tone ever so hypnotizing. Will notices that his accent has developed slightly, sounding more vaguely European and not strictly Lithuanian, as Will now remembers he is. And, Hannibal used a contraction, which he seldom did before. And, yes, still, it's the only sound Will wants to hear for the rest of his life. After a beat of Will's silence, Hannibal continues, "I thought you would be pleased to see me."

The sentence hangs in the air between them like a death row convict and Will's sure his shock is evident in his expression.

Finally, Will musters enough wherewithal to say, "You *groomed* me." He's not sure why that's the first thing that comes to mind— He's never used that word before, even in his own

head. “You killed people,” he thinks to add, realizing suddenly and with tremendous guilt that that is obviously the more damnable crime. *Jesus,* Will thinks, *I’m fucked.* And he is.

Hannibal sniffs, just a subtle twitch of the nose, a flare of his nostrils, and he readjusts his hands on the table, laying them flat. “I did no such thing,” he says primly, and Will isn’t sure which transgression Hannibal’s denying.

“What the fuck are you *doing here*?” Will repeats, deciding that, after all, it is a very good question.

“I’m consulting on a case, as a favor to Jack. I’m sure you’re aware of the arsonist targeting low-income housing in Columbia H—”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Will interrupts as panic and anger well up within him, as the realization that this is really happening sets in. His worst nightmare. “How long have you been in America?” he berates, “Does anyone— Do they know who you are? *What* you are?”

Hannibal smiles playfully and Will wants to— wants to— No, nothing. Will wants to arrest Hannibal for the murder of Gioconda Agosti. That’s all. “I could ask you the very same,” Hannibal responds coolly.

Will narrows his eyes at Hannibal. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he asks.

“We are *homoousios*, Will,” Hannibal says with his teeth showing. His canines shimmer in the poor afternoon light. “‘Of the same stuff,’” Hannibal explains and Will *knows his theology, you prick.* “That thing inside me, of which you are so afraid… It’s within you, as well. Undeniable and yet, you deny its very existence.”

Will allows himself to roll his eyes. Visibly. Obnoxiously obviously. “I forgot how cliched you are, Hannibal,” Will says even though he never really thought Hannibal was cliched, when he was younger. Though, God, Hannibal had to be. He had to be the cheapest trick in the book and Will fell hook, line, sinker.

“If we’re going to be colleagues, I must ask that you call me by my name,” Hannibal says slyly, the joke so obvious he doesn’t need to say the punchline.

Will opens his mouth to bite back, something about Hannibal and names, rhymes, irony, et cetera. But Jack reappears suddenly and happily, clearly having seen Will and Hannibal speaking from a distance and mistakenly believing them to get along, and Will shuts up. Jack has to know, but Hannibal has to think he doesn’t. So Will keeps his mouth closed, his lips pursed, and clenches his hands into fists under the table.

“What’s the topic of the discussion?” Jack asks jovially. Will grits his teeth.

Hannibal smiles his charming, devilish smile and says, “I’m afraid I was just wishing Will farewell.” *Who says ‘farewell’?* “As I mentioned previously, I have a prior committment…”

Hannibal briefly pauses and just on cue, Jack interrupts, “At four! Yes! I’m afraid we kept you.” Hannibal nods graciously, acknowledging the faux-pas. “Well, I’ll walk you to your

car, then," Jack says by way of apology.

And just like that, Hannibal is whisked away from Will's life and Will begins the painstaking process of convincing himself it was some awful dream. But then Jack reappears and he's asking Will what Will thinks of dear old "Lois" and if they discussed the arsonist and, by the way, what does Will think about the choice of location for the attacks and the fact that there were so many people in the buildings and is it political, consider the fact that—

"I know him," Will says, barely conscious of the fact that he's interrupting.

"What?"

Will swallows and eyes the full glass of water, full glass of white wine, and the out-of-season mackerel on his plate before him, untouched. He has to tell Jack. He has to catch Hannibal. He has to. "I know… '*Lois*.' I knew him in high school. We met… He guest-lectured at my boarding school in Italy," Will says, struggling to articulate the relationship he and Hannibal had. Other than the cautious, hands-off way Will thinks about Hannibal every day, he hasn't seriously reminisced since college.

"You went to Italy?" Jack asks and Will scowls.

Leave it to Jack to focus on the exact wrong part of the damn story. Will shakes his head. "That's not— *Listen*, that man is not who he says he is." Will huffs a deep breath out, trying to collect himself. "I met him in Italy in 1993. He was…" Will struggles, not wanting to startle Jack in a crowded space, "*hurting* people, before I ever even got there and he's probably doing the same now, Jack. He's a really dangerous man." '*Man' is generous,* Will thinks bitterly.

Jack, who had been smiling uncaringly when Will had begun speaking, now morphs into a picture of concern. His brow is furrowing deeply and his lower lip purses slightly. "Are you feeling alright?" he asks, his voice slow and even, meant to be reassuring, actually driving Will insane.

Will's chest clenches, and he has a realization. Hannibal has done this perfectly. His background will come up clean and realistic, a human life synthesized flawlessly on paper. His answers to questions will line up and coalesce every time, no matter who asks him what. He will pass lie detector test after interrogation after goddamn written exam on his backstory, which he has so artfully constructed so as not to draw attention to himself, but also in such a way that allows a great deal of grandiosity. He will kill. Again. And again, and again, if he hasn't already, and he won't get caught. Will only ever got so close to catching him, and only because Hannibal… let him in. "You're right," Will says, his voice flat and an obvious reflection of his numbness. "I'm not feeling well. I should go," Will stands and wraps Winston's leash tight around his fist, cutting into his palm, not for fear that Winston will try to run but for fear that Will will.

Jack stands too, clattering awkwardly against the rim of the table, his napkin falling from his lap to the floor. "Don't go, Will," he says and Will pauses. Maybe because he's so checked out he would do anything he was ordered to. Maybe because part of him truly trusts and respects Jack. Maybe because one, tiny sliver of Will hopes Jack is about to reveal that this

has all been one, lifelong joke at Will's expense, but it's over now, and no one ever really died. "It's just…" Jack begins and Will looks down at Winston, who is looking up at him woefully, "Accusing a stranger of being… What— A criminal? A murderer? Someone you knew in high school?" Will looks at Winston still, as Winston flops his head to one side as if to say, *Tough luck, buddy.* "Frankly, this in combination with your fixation on the in-fighting between the homeless…" Then, Jack asks the worst question in the world, "How much time did you take off after your father passed away? A week? A few days, even?" Will finally breaks eye contact with Winston and looks up at Jack who is trying his best to stare him down. However, Will's gaze is intense, and makes people uncomfortable, and Jack is no exception. He looks away.

"I'm fine," Will bites out. "That was a couple months ago. This isn't about that." And it really isn't. Will and his father were never… And towards the end of his life he was so… It was just hard to… Will shakes his head. "This isn't about that," he repeats, or maybe says for the first time out loud.

"It was eight months ago, Will."

Will frowns, deeply, feeling it between his eyebrows. He tugs Winston's leash slightly and Winston stands, squeezes between Will's legs and the table's, and trots towards the direction of the exit, the blessed creature. Will follows. "Thanks for everything, Jack," Will mutters unthinkingly.

"Wait!" Jack calls out while Will is still in range to hear him without him having to shout. "I'm sorry!" And Will doesn't believe him for a second. *Sorry to lose your best man,* Will thinks. "I'll look into Lois!" Jack says, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the din of *The Filling Station.* Will turns back and, without really catching Jack's eye, nods his head once, twice, disappears. Jack won't find anything wrong with "Lois'" background, but he has good instincts, and Will prays that will be enough.

That night, Will sleeps fitfully. He has nightmares about hooves, splitting and splintering, bleeding out the poor creature— What is that? A deer? A man? His fur is feather-soft one way, prickly the other. His antlers are tall, and razor-sharp. Will reaches out a hand to touch his shiny nose but he scuffs his hooves against the ground and it sounds like, *Scrtch, scrtch, scrtch.* Will opens his eyes. *Scrtch, scrtch, scrtch, SCRTCH.* ***SCRTCH!*** Will sits up in bed.

There's something in his chimney.

He climbs out of his wrecked mess of bedding and tugs on a pair of ragged sweatpants. He goes to the kitchen to dig around for a flashlight. In doing all this, he wakes several dogs, who follow at his heels, hoping for one of Will's midnight walks. They seem unbothered by the scuffling coming from Will's large redbricked chimney, though the sound persists, getting louder and louder. Will gets on his knees in front of the fireplace and angles his flashlight upwards, craning his neck to see the narrow beam of light illuminate… nothing. Not bats or a raccoon or a ghost. Nothing. Then, Will hears it. ***SCRTCH!*** He jumps, startling the dogs who have gathered around him.

Will ends up taking an ax to the chimney.

He wakes up to a loud, aggressive knocking on his front door. It's especially loud, as Will sleeps in the living room. Will pulls himself out of bed, groggy and perturbed, letting the dogs who gather around him nose at his palm and the back of his knees. He stumbles towards the door and opens it to reveal Alana Bloom. She's short, a near six inches shorter than Will, but she makes a point to make eye contact with everyone, except Will, whose eye she politely and respectfully avoids. She's beautiful, too, and smart as a whip. She smiles up at Will and Will focuses on her lipsticked mouth. He would probably like to kiss her.

"Hi, Will," she says, her voice mellow and melodic. She reminds him, sometimes, of someone he once knew. "How are you?" she asks.

Will looks out past her shoulder to see that the temperamental weather has struck once again, and that it snowed last night. There's slush surrounding Will's little oasis of warmth. "It's cold out," Will observes unintelligently. He looks back at Alana, who is still smiling, but there's a strange furrow above her nose. She's nervous. Will wonders why. "Come in," Will says, opening the door wider. She enters his house and Will feels a brief spark of embarrassment at the state of his entryway and living room: it's in disarray, his bed unmade, dog hair covering every surface, unwashed laundry in a hamper in the corner. But Will, at his core, remains unbothered by this. Alana has seen worse. From Will himself, for that matter. "How are you?" Will thinks to ask as Alana politely ignores the mess and takes a seat on his couch.

"I'm very well," Alana answers. "I have to admit," she says slowly, caution obvious in her voice, "I'm more interested in how *you* are." She smiles again and, actually, Will sees now that it's a strictly concerned smile. Leave it to Alana to disguise it so well. But no, Will can tell now, she's more worried than anything else. There's something wrong, and Alana knows it. She's waiting for Will to ask. Will frowns.

"What is it?" Will gives in after a beat of awkward silence.

Alana folds her hands in her lap. She really is put together. All her pieces in place, everything bundled up and internal. She's not like Will, at all, really. He's not sure what they have in common beyond work, but he knows he likes her. He likes her enough to wait while she looks around his house, not judging but accounting. Maybe he likes her because she is so… *kept up.* She keeps up. "Will," she says, "we planned to meet for coffee three hours ago." *Fuck.* Fuck! Will is a fuck up. Undeniably so. Alana is an angel. *Undeniably so.* Then, Alana looks past him, towards the wreck of his fireplace. She says nothing.

"Sorry," Will mutters, sounding young to his own ears. And ashamed.

“It’s okay, Will. It’s just… Are you alright?” she asks with that same reserved concern.

Will doesn’t understand the question. “Have you been speaking to Jack?” he asks.

“What?” The question clearly catches Alana off-guard. She frowns openly. “No, I just…” she shifts uncomfortably. Jesus, has Will made her uncomfortable? “I’m worried about you.” And, God, that’s so much worse. She’s *worried* about him? Fuck. Jesus fucking Christ. ‘Worried’ is a slippery fucking slope if Will’s ever seen one.

“Sorry,” Will starts compulsively, shaking his head and frowning, “why are you worried?” He runs through the possibilities in his mind but, fuck, people are hard to figure out. Alana could have spoken to Dr. Du Maurier. Alana could’ve spoken to Jack, but she said she didn’t and she doesn’t usually lie. Alana could’ve spoken to one of Will’s students, but Will can’t imagine they would have any insight into Will’s personal life. That really just leaves Dr. Du Maurier. “Have you spoken to my psychiatrist?”

“Will,” Alana admonishes, “that’s unethical.” Will supposes it is. Alana values her ethics above all else but, God, Will’s seen people sink lower, and for less. “No, I didn't talk to anyone. I’m coming to you…” Alana says, her voice sweet yet dignified, “as a friend.”

Will supposes they are friends, he and Alana. They’ve known each other for years. They socialize. They talk. But not about things like this. They aren’t ‘close’ by any means. Will does his best to keep his distance from everybody, especially the people he likes. Will tried with Alana but she’s as persistent as she is compassionate. “You’re a good friend, Alana,” Will says, making his voice as soft as he can. It still comes out numb, harsh. “But I promise, I’m fine,” and the ‘fine’ is forceful. “I promise.”

Alana gives him a mercifully trusting look. “I believe you *and* I can tell that you’re under a great deal of stress right now,” she says firmly. Alana never uses the word ‘but’ if she can help it. She says it undoes whatever you put before it. She says she’s looking to honor multiple truths. She really is a very good person. “Talk to me. What’s going on?” And she asks so earnestly, without an ounce of judgment, so clearly wanting Will to just *open up*… Will wishes he could. His gaze skates across Alana’s piercing blue eyes. She looks back at him, unguarded. Will sees that she is so, so true. To her core. She only ever wants to help.

“There’s someone from my past, who’s come back,” Will says. It’s a moment of weakness. The moment continues: “I met him when I was seventeen and he… We…” Will blinks. He tells himself to stop talking but he can’t seem to. He says, “We slept together. He was a little older and so… *established*. Well-connected, well-liked. I was…” *powerless,* Will thinks. “Young.” God. He was so young. And small— just a little taller than Alana, skinny, wired with muscle. He would’ve said yes to anything Hannibal asked of him. He would’ve… and he did. “I was very in love with him and that made it so much harder for me to—” Will sucks in a breath, suddenly feeling his chest tighten, his ribcage contract and begin to crush his internal organs. “I just gave in. I gave in to him.” Will keeps talking, cognizant of the sound of his own voice but not much more than that— visualizing one, blaring, obvious message in his mind: *I COULD’VE STOPPED HIM FROM KILLING HER.*

He sees her then. Right in front of him. She’s still 17, perfectly preserved, like a butterfly wing behind glass. Tall for her age, though she will never grow any taller. Beautiful.

Untouched by her demise, but then, no, Will sees it bloom from her chest, the red, like an ugly flower, spreading across her torso, drenching her. Will reaches out to touch her— to *stop it from happening*, but it's too late, so late, Will's always too late, never sees what's right in front of, got her killed, *Oh my god.*

"Will," Will hears Alana say, which means he must've stopped talking. Or maybe she spoke over him. Maybe they're both still talking. Will focuses just on the sound of Alana's soothing voice, which remains even and calm, though Will can read her suppressed panic, "You're having a flashback." *Is that what this is?* Will wonders, his body rigid as if rigor mortis has set in. *No, no,* Will thinks, *no, this is death. I'm dead.* "Whatever happened is in the past now. You survived, Will. You're safe now." But he isn't, really. Hannibal's here, in America, and he's going to kill again. "Do you feel my hand, Will? What can you feel?" she's asking and Will tries his best to feel— *Oh*. There it is. Her hand on his bare forearm, pleasant and soothing, cool and soft. Her press is firm and still and Will can feel it. "What can you hear, Will? Can you hear the sound of my voice?" Will can. It's beautiful. Like a well-tuned piano. Will can hear Alana's voice. "What can you smell?" Will takes a breath in and can't smell much; just the barely-present scent of well-groomed dogs, the smoky, dusty smell coming from the remains of Will's demolished fireplace, and the fresh, cold, Spring air. "What can you see?" Will opens his eyes, having not realized they were closed. It's his house, in Wolf Trap, Virginia, in scattered disarray but comforting nonetheless. This is a place which Hannibal has never touched.

Just then, there's another knock at the door.

Will realizes he's shaking and he's afraid he'll topple right over if he has to stand. Thankfully, Alana rises quickly and murmurs, "I'll get it, stay right there." Will sighs slightly, relieved and embarrassed all at once. He cranes his neck to watch as Alana crosses the living room to the front door. She opens it and… Who else would it be?

Hannibal stands there in his three piece suit, smiling a pleasant, surprised smile. Will wants to go at him, teeth bared. He realizes he's let out a sound like a gasp. "Dr. Bloom," Hannibal greets Alana kindly. "What a pleasant surprise. I stopped by to apologize to Will— Is he available?" Will knows he's in Hannibal's eyeline, if only Hannibal peered past Alana's shoulder, but he's too polite to do so. He maintains eye contact with Alana, and doesn't look at Will. Will alternates looking between Hannibal's face and the back of Alana's head, which cocks to one side.

"Hello, Dr. Mort. I wasn't aware you two knew each other," she says, her annoyance coming through in her slightly clipped tone, though it likely wouldn't be perceptible to anyone other than Will. Other than Hannibal. "He's resting, right now, I'm afraid," she continues, shifting her weight slightly. Will realizes she's moved to obscure him from Hannibal's sight. *Oh, Alana,* Will thinks. *If only that could protect me.* "Apologize for what, if I may ask?"

Will can't really make out Hannibal's expression now, just the top of his head. Still, Will stares as Hannibal says, "Jack introduced us and I made a poor first impression." *Actually,* Will thinks bitterly, *your first impression was just fine, all those years ago. It's this second impression that's thrown me for a loop.* If Will could talk, he'd cross the room and slam the door in Hannibal's face. Winston sets his head on Will's lap rather forcefully just as Will's

fantasizing about the thick oak door against Hannibal's nose, indicating that Winston has been trying for Will's attention for some time. Will looks down and smiles his best 'Everything's alright' smile, though he doubts it's very convincing. He probably *smells* distressed to Winston right now. "You are… sure he's unavailable?" Hannibal asks, the politeness in his tone ever present, ever in contrast with his need for social domination.

Alana angles the front door slightly so it works to obscure Will further and Will finally, finally, stops trying to steal another look at Hannibal. He sits back on the couch and runs his hand over Winston's smooth coat. He can't stand the sight of Hannibal, anyways. He supposes it's like a car accident. Can't help yourself but to look. "He's quite indisposed," Alana insists. "Another time?"

Hannibal's voice remains perfectly agreeable as he says, "Of course. It was very good seeing you."

The silence that follows stretches out long enough that Will finally feels it's appropriate to sit up and lean forward, seeking out Alana. She's standing, silhouetted by the door frame, watching him. They make eye contact. She raises her eyebrows, a silent, extended, *Are you alright?* But she must see something on his face in return because her eyebrows quickly knit together in a furrowed portrait of concern. Will guesses that that's okay— She might as well just see the truth written all over his face. The truth being that Will is really, really not okay.

"It's him, Alana," Will says, his voice filling up the empty space like a combustible gas.

Alana, it appears, is capable of surprising Will. "I'll talk to Jack," she says.

That night, Will's woken up again by the scuffling sound, this time coming from the other side of the front door. And this time, Will doesn't bother opening the door to try to see what it is. He rolls out of bed and begins digging around in closets for his old forensics photography camera, left over from his college days. As he goes, he pulls on pants, a flannel over his undershirt, socks, and shoes. Finally, he finds the camera and throws it in his beat-up messenger bag. He zips up his sturdy coat and shoulders the bag.

The drive to Hannibal's house— which Will locates easily (it's listed as 'Lois Mort's home office' online), is surprisingly short. Will keeps his hands tight on the wheel, his white knuckle grip betraying his distress to no one. He doesn't even bring one of the dogs with him, though they piled up at the door trying to persuade him. As he drives, Will focuses on his reason for the journey. It's so clearly defined; a goal so easy to orient oneself towards: catch Hannibal Lecter.

Will arrives at Hannibal's house around three A.M. It's pitch black outside, though the house emits a warm golden glow, almost inviting, if Will didn't know any better. A sliver of moon peeks out from behind a cast of pale gray clouds, as well as a few distant stars. Will focuses on his feet as he ducks through brushes and forges a pathway through greenery surrounding the perimeter of the house. He shuffles around and finds a somewhat cleared spot among the holly trees and flowering bushes and pulls out his Nikon. From his secretive vantage point,

he can see through the massive windows into Hannibal's kitchen, where Hannibal stands in rolled up sleeves and a white apron, stripping a hunk of meat off the bone. It looks like a human thigh with all the skin removed, reduced to a piece of bloody musculature and fat. Will photographs. He zooms in, focusing the lens on Hannibal's arm as it flexes and he works the knife. Hannibal's soaked in red, up to his elbows, and his fingers shine with wetness, wrapped around the handle. The camera shutter clicks, again and again as Will's pointer finger works the button.

Will frowns. The camera unfocuses automatically and Will scrolls to the settings menu. He thumbs through options, but his finger slips as he startles at the sound of nearby rustling. He lands on the flash and, because he tenses, the camera goes off. Emitting a bright white burst of light. In the exact direction of the window into Hannibal's kitchen. Fuck.

Hannibal's head whips towards the light and Will dives below the brush of greenery.

Will's breath comes in harsh and fast and he does his best to get it under control. When he gathers himself enough to peek above the mass of leaves which hide him from view, Hannibal's gone from his kitchen, and the light's turned off. *Fuck.* Will turns his head towards the direction which the rustling sound came from. There's nothing but the black of night and the green of the brush. But Will swears he hears the slightest, softest exhale. There's someone else there. Watching Hannibal.

"Who's here?" Will whispers into the darkness. "Who is it?"

"Hello, Will Graham," a voice emerges from the darkness, no louder than a pin dropping in a silent room, "Good to see you again."

Oh, Will thinks, *it's you.*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, I'm back way too soon for someone who has midterms week. What can I say? Writing this is my therapy.

CHAPTER III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will has met Freddie Lounds on a number of occasions, mostly under greasy, unsightly circumstances. Removing her from crime scenes and such. The first time they met was in a hospital, Will laid up with a stab wound and Freddie there, with her camera, publishing his IV in the *Tattler*. God, Will hates Freddie Lounds. “Hello, Ms. Lounds,” he says into the darkness, her pale face, her sharp jawline, illuminated only by slices of moonlight as it cuts through the tree branches. She smiles her mischievious, mousy smile.

“I see you’re an avid fan of Dr. Mort’s work as well,” she says. “How wonderful to meet under these circumstances.” Her voice is a whisper under the cover of night but it still grates, like a serrated blade to the inside of Will's skull.

“What are you doing here, Freddie?” he asks, cutting the bullshit.

Freddie breaks into a grin. “I could ask you the same thing,” she says. “That’s the beauty of it all.”

Will scowls. This isn’t going to be fun. “Are you stalking me?” Will grits out.

Freddie glances at the house and Will follows her gaze. The light in the hallway just past the kitchen has turned on. “That’s my cue,” Freddie mutters and just like that, she’s gone. Disappeared into the night. Will frowns at the spot of darkness left behind.

He glances over at the house and sees Hannibal approaching the window. Will zips his coat to the collar and nestles the camera safely into the messenger bag. And just like that, Will’s gone too. A fellow creature of the night.

Will arrives early at Jack’s office, glossy, high resolution photographs in hand. Will hasn’t slept, but it doesn’t matter. He couldn’t if he tried. And he doesn’t want to. All it leads to is dreams and nightmares about deer and rivers of blood and Hannibal, always Hannibal. Will blinks away the images from his dreams (and his waking life) and knocks on Jack’s door.

“Come in,” Jack calls from within and Will shoulders the door open. Jack looks up from his desk and smiles as Will enters, shuffling around a few papers. Will grips his photographs tightly and closes the door behind him. “You’re just the person I wanted to see,” Jack says jovially, putting files back into folders and putting them away in his various drawers and cabinets. “There’s a new serial,” Jack says. “An actual serial, not a fixation, or whatever the unhoused are for you.” *Jesus,* Will thinks, *Jack doesn’t let up.* “Not another goddamn, unsolvable arsonist, either. A serial killer. And I need your eyes.” Will glances down at his photos of Hannibal, covered in blood. “By the way,” Jack adds, “are you alright?”

Will frowns. “What?” he asks. “Have you been talking to Alana?” He is so sick of feeling like everyone in his life is convening to discuss his mental wellbeing without him knowing about it.

Luckily, Jack glances up, a crease worn deep between his eyebrows. “No,” he says, looking back down. He gestures with his pen towards Will and says, absently, “You’re sweating.”

Will shakes his head. He is, but it doesn’t matter. “I have something to—”

“Oh,” Jack interrupts, “and Lois told me to talk you into attending his dinner party.” Will’s vision whites out and all he can hear is Jack’s booming voice as he says, “He didn’t use those words, of course, but that was the point.” Will’s shaking, he knows, but it doesn’t matter. A dinner party is the end of the world. “You really should come,” Jack says. Nothing matters. Hannibal Lecter is throwing a dinner party. “You and Lois have a lot in common.”

Homoousian, Hannibal had called them.

That snaps Will back to reality. “I have to show you the truth about ‘Lois’,” Will says, his voice coming out forceful and angry. Gruff. Panicked. Will shakes his head, slaps the photos down on Jack’s desk. “He’s not who he says he is, Jack, believe me.” It’s a plea, more than a command. It always has been. *Believe me. Believe me. Please.*

“What is this?” Jack asks as he shuffles through the pictures. “Are you stalking Lois?”

Will glances around the room, nervously avoiding Jack’s gaze. “Have you ever heard of ‘Il Mostro’?” Will asks. “He was an Italian serial killer in the early 90’s. *Il Mostro,* Jack.” Jack gives will an unwitting look and Will elaborates, “‘Lois Mort’ is an anagram.”

“Lois Mort,” Jack says, looking back at the photos, “is an unlucky passerby.” He sets the photos down on his desk with an air of finality. “You broke the law, Will. And for what? What does this prove? I can’t—”

Will stops him, “I didn’t *break* anything. Or enter. These were taken from outside the house.” Will omits the detail of Freddie’s presence, not wanting to admit that he’s sunk to her level, as Jack would see it. “It *proves* that he’s cutting people up into little pieces.”

“As far as I know,” Jack says, unimpressed, “stalking is still a crime. And this could be venison.”

Will scoffs. “Or long pork, maybe,” he quips. “Jesus, Jack, open your eyes,” he says, not meaning to lose his temper, but losing it anyways. How could Jack close his eyes to something like this? A prolific serial killer right in front of him, throwing dinner parties with courses full of people, *inviting* Jack, reveling in his own ingenious plot to evade capture, forever, forever… Jack needs to see. He just needs to see. “The stage of murders along the metro line,” Will says, his words crushed together. “When did ‘Lois’ arrive in town? Just when they started, right?” Jack says nothing. “They’re staged, Jack, meticulously staged to look like squabbles over encampment territory. It’s *him*.” And Will still can’t say his name out loud.

“‘Staged’,” Jack repeats the word. “And how do you prove that in a court of law?” Jack’s voice has raised, become angry, and Will shudders slightly. Jack doesn’t let up. “Or to me, right now, for that matter?” he demands.

“I could prove it,” Will answers quietly, feeling suddenly young, suddenly shy, as if he’s being chastised by a school marm. “I could prove it, with the right resources,” Will says in a stronger, firmer voice.

Jack’s voice, when he responds, is even and measured. His stare is steady. He speaks, “What are you asking of me?”

And that’s when Will hesitates. The list of things which Will needs to catch Hannibal Lecter is extensive and not easily attained. “I need time,” he begins. A lot of it. Hannibal’s a tricky beast; illusive, cagey, aware when he’s being hunted. “Money,” Will continues. Finally, it’s the big one. The big ask. The impossible endeavor. “I need to get close to him,” Will admits. It’s the only option. “I need to be inside his head.”

“What’s your endgame?” Jack asks.

Will swallows. “To catch him,” Will answers and it’s half the truth.

There’s a long, long pause. Jack regards Will and Will sets his jaw, refuses to crumble under Jack’s gaze. If this is the only gun Will ever sticks to, it will have been worth it. Will won’t let Hannibal go a second time. Will’s so sure on this. So sure. It’s all he knows. Catch Hannibal Lecter. Finally, Jack gives his answer. “No,” he says simply.

“‘No’-what?” Will asks, though it’s a pointless question.

“‘No’,” Jack responds, “to funding your vigilante revengle-plot against an innocent psychiatrist who likes veal. No, Will. I can’t back you on this one.” Will says nothing. He doesn’t move. *It’s fine,* he tells himself willfully, *I don’t need Jack. I can do this on my own.* Jack adds, “I’m sorry.” Jack's voice is pitiful and Will resents him for it.

Something occurs to Will. “Who’s the new serial?” he asks.

Jack looks at him dubiously. *Not Dr. Lois Mort,* his expression says clearly. Will juts his chin, standing his ground. “Unsub with a religious fixation, surgical precision, lots of experience.” Jack lists facts like he’s reading the back of a box of cereal, so callously, so numb to it all. Will bites the inside of his cheek. Will wonders if he’ll ever stop feeling like it’s his body in the crime scene photos, his guts on the floor. “Why do you ask?” Jack inquires.

Will doesn’t answer his question. He orders, instead, “Look into Il Mostro.” And with that, he turns on his heel and exits Jack’s office, leaving behind the photos of Hannibal, elbow deep in gore. Will already knows where he’s headed, before he ever gets in his car. He needs to see Hannibal. Will needs to speak to him this time.

“Who are you having for dinner?” Will demands as soon as Hannibal’s door swings open on its hinges, revealing Hannibal, in a waistcoat and well-pressed slacks, still so—

Hannibal smiles his sharp, knowing smirk. “Would you like a guest list?” he offers.

Will opens his mouth to spit some unplanned, likely venomous response when he’s interrupted by the crunch of gravel underneath tire as a car pulls into Hannibal’s lengthy driveway. Will looks over his shoulder and sees a police officer climb out of his patrol car. Will recognizes him. Former ankle jerk sequestered to the Mental Evaluation Response Team after being too much of an *asshole*. He probably had a field day when Will took his leave. *Dunne*. That’s his name. Nate Dunne. What an idiot.

Dunne nods politely past Will’s shoulder, towards Hannibal, who looks politely confused. “Good morning, sir,” Dunne says to Hannibal before ducking towards his brick and saying, “5150.” He looks at Hannibal again, still ignoring Will. “I received a call about a stalker.”

“What?” Will demands as Dunne approaches.

“Bus to 387 Cedercrest Drive,” Dunne says, wearing a sleazy smile. “We have a possible 646.9, JDLR.” *Just doesn’t look right, my ass,* Will thinks, glaring at Dunne with such animosity he’s surprised Dunne doesn’t melt into a puddle on the ground. Dunne gives Hannibal another weaselly, greasy grin. “You’ve met this man before, correct?” Dunne asks Hannibal.

Will looks to Hannibal, too stunned and affronted to really speak, beyond another, strangled, “What?” This can’t be happening.

Hannibal answers Dunne, simply, “Yes.” Hannibal looks at Will with a gleam in his eye. Will watches him back, looking into his murky, red-brown eyes. *Was this your plan all along?* Will wonders, feeling sick to his stomach. *Has this been your vision, since 1993?*

“And he’s given you trouble in the past?” Dunne prompts and Will watches in horror as Hannibal plays his part perfectly, the guileless victim of Will’s obsessive stalking. And, Jesus, Will, a 5150? What a fucking joke. Will’s not dangerous to anyone but Hannibal.

“I’m afraid I found him lurking around the outskirts of my property last night,” Hannibal answers as if it doesn’t occur to him to use the word ‘stalking’, as if that’s too accusatory for an upstanding citizen like ‘Lois Mort’. “He had a camera, I believe,” Hannibal adds, as if he’s just remembering that sordid, damning detail. As if he’s not even sure whether or not it’s relevant. And Dunne eats it up.

“Understood,” Dunne answers with a serious nod, as if this is all life-threatening business, to be handled carefully. *What a fucking joke,* Will thinks as Dunne pulls out a ziptie.

Will complies.

Will complies as Dunne pulls him in the direction of the roller, ziptying his wrists together behind his back, tugging at his bad shoulder. He complies as Dunne harrasses him for his height, just like old times. “Not so big now, huh, Graham?” Dunne chides as Will stares

blankly out the window. “Gonna lose your cushy professor-job over this one, I think,” he says around his smug fucking smile. *God*, couldn’t Will have been arrested by anyone else? “That shrink the Bureau sicked on you tattled, Graham. Sung like a bird. You’re screwed.” *Goddamn Bedelia Du Maurier.* “She called you a diagnosable nutcase. Smart lady.” Will watches as an actual bird flits through the branches of a tree which hangs over the car. Sunlight freckles through the gaps in the leaves. “Your girlfriend talked, too. Her and Crawford make quite the team.” Will jerks his head towards the rear-view mirror, where he can see Dunne’s eyes reflected, narrowed, watching Will for a reaction. He’s baiting Will.

Will cuts his gaze back to the window. He won’t be baited.

“Don’t be too worried, Graham,” Dunne continues, presumably still watching Will in the mirror. “Prison’s good to pretty boys like you.”

Will frowns. Someone said something like that to him in high school once. After Hannibal left. Some implication about Will’s relationship with his father, a joke about bending Will over a desk in the middle of class. A promise that when Will gets locked up for being a freak, he’ll be in good company. Will was so alone, then.

He’s alone now, too. Without Jack. Alana betrayed him, apparently. Dr. Du Maurier, who Will was actually kind of beginning to like, is perhaps the most responsible for Will’s current situation. Will wasn’t ever good at ‘friends’ but this is a new low for him. He’s never seen the back of a police car before. When he— He rode in the front seat after the incident in March.

Will isn’t self-pitying, though. He’s curious to see what will happen. He’s furious with Hannibal, for doing this to him. For always doing this to him, in some way or another. He’s, perhaps, slightly wounded that Alana and Jack would do this to him. But not surprised. Not surprised, not sorry for himself, just sitting in the back of a cop car waiting for an ambulance he doesn’t need to arrive and change his life. Will frowns deeply. *What will happen to my dogs?* Will wonders, finally feeling some form of dread set in. *What will happen to Winston?*

Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY!!! Chapter four coming ASAP.

CHAPTER IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winston, and the rest of Will's well-trained rescues go to Alana. This is almost enough to make Will forgive her. He's seen Alana's house; it's not really built for seven full grown dogs. But Will's taken time with each one of them to ensure they're all well-behaved, well-meaning, *good* dogs and Will knows they'll treat Alana well. Still, it's partially her fault that Will, himself, goes under hold for 72 hours. They strap him to the hospital bed and everything. Apparently, Will tried to kill himself. Only after stalking the oblivious, well-liked, and prestigious Dr. Lois Mort, who unfortunately and salaciously caught Will prowling around his property late at night, of course. Dr. Du Maurier, ever prescient, has already transferred Will's care to a Dr. Frederick Chilton by the time Will's house is searched and evidence of multiple murders is found, as well as the much-less-incriminating late-night photos of Dr. Mort inside his home. Will is transferred to Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. They found human hair in his fly fishing equipment. They found flesh in his bait. They found various blades, all large and serrated. Nothing matched up to any open cases, but Will knows this game. It'll all turn up eventually, probably in the Penobscot, bodies deteriorated to the point that no one will be able to determine *when* the killing started, but with enough remaining evidence to damn Will to hell. Not that it matters anymore. With Hannibal on the East Coast, Will's life was bound to become living hell at some point.

They want a confession, perhaps to wrap a nice, neat bow around the mess of evidence found in Wolf Trap, but Will can't give them that. It would probably grant him certain privileges, but it's not worth it, to play into Hannibal's lie. Will doesn't see Jack, or anyone he truly knows, during the arrest and conviction process, but he still pictures Jack's disappointed face as Will pleads innocent, and is convicted guilty. Doesn't matter. Jack can choke on his own dismay as far as Will's concerned.

Really, actually, Will's realizing nothing matters, except stopping Hannibal from killing again.

Stopping Hannibal is tricky from behind bars. The first part of Will's plan is yielding to his new therapist, despite the fact that Will despises him. Will doesn't think Dr. Chilton's his number one fan either, for that matter. God has a cruel sense of humor, as it's just then that Dr. Chilton marches into the wide expanse of space which makes up the room they keep Will's glorified cage in, which he's transferred to during appointments. Dr. Chilton's shoes *clack* loudly against the concrete floors. Will asked him once, why this room doesn't have real floors. *Easier to hose down, Mr. Graham,* Dr. Chilton had answered coolly. "Think of the devil," Will says by way of greeting.

Dr. Chilton takes a seat in the chair opposite Will's cage, behind what Will affectionately regards as the 'pissing-line.' Dr. Chilton regards Will with a cold, uncaring gaze, though he wears a humorless smirk. "You accuse me of being the devil," Dr. Chilton begins and then

continues, “yet you are the one who the *Tattler* has called ‘The Deadly Night Stalker’. Perhaps it’s you, Mr. Graham. Perhaps it’s always been you.”

Will resists the urge to roll his eyes, which would undeniably lead to Dr. Chilton scribbling a note in his sophisticated notepad, which he holds in his lap. Instead, Will forces his voice into something as uncaring as Dr. Chilton, a casual, unbothered, “Not Lounds’ most exemplary use of nomenclature.”

Dr. Chilton’s smile broadens. “No,” he says, “Not nearly as evocative as the work which it names.” Dr. Chilton crosses his legs. He straightens his shoulders, and chuckles at his own little joke. *God, he’s obnoxious* , Will thinks, doing his best to maintain a neutral expression. *And obvious.* Everything Dr. Chilton thinks and feels is broadcasted by his body language and choice of words. Will finds it nauseating. “*Flesh in the chum bucket,*” Dr. Chilton quotes, presumably from a *Tattler* article which Will hasn’t been allowed to read. *Smug*. “Of course, that isn’t what you were going for— Shock value, that is,” Dr. Chilton says, then clicks his tongue unpleasantly. *Self-satisfied.* “No, no, no, you, Mr. Graham, were quite a private killer.” *Humiliatingly and obnoxiously pleased*.

If someone were to ask Will— and no one has, but if someone were to ask him if he *enjoys* sitting in a cage and being asked to detail how a series of murders (which he did not commit) make him *feel* , Will would have to answer honestly. No, he does not enjoy this. There is nothing about Dr. Chilton’s sleazy smile, his piercing, curious eyes, his god-fucking-damn notepad, which Will finds enjoyable.

“Kept all your ducks in a row, *with* the exception of that nasty little accident with—” Dr. Chilton pretends to remember, “What was he? A vandal?” Dr. Chilton’s smile hangs crookedly to the right and his yellow-y teeth show when he speaks, “A public urinator?”

Convicted murderer, Will thinks but doesn’t say.

“Other than that hiccup…” Dr. Chilton continues, “Tell me, what was it like, living with that secret? Did you find it… *titillating*?” Dr. Chilton’s lip curls as he enunciated his ‘*t*’-sound. “Was it like a sick, twisted game, keeping all your ducks in a row, flying under the radar—”

“You’re mixing your metaphors, Dr. Chilton,” Will says and cringes, immediately.

Dr. Chilton grins a sharp smile, obviously pleased at the fact of having ‘got’ to Will. “Does that bother you?” he asks, his voice nasally and unattractive. “*Mixing*? Would you prefer it all neat, organized, separated out?” Dr. Chilton smiles in a way which shows his flat, yellow canines.

Will frowns, then quickly straightens his face out into something more neutral, more difficult to read. “Are you insinuating I’m obsessive, compulsive, or racist?” Will asks, his voice dull and bored, somewhat-affected but mostly earnest.

Dr. Chilton chuckles dryly. “None of the above. I only wish to get to know you better. I want to see how that mind of yours… *ticks*.” Dr. Chilton tilts his head. “Tick, tock, tick, tock, Mr. Graham,” he says, his hard ‘ck’-sounds echoing in the large, bare space. Obnoxiously. “Are you pure psychopath, Will? More of a sociopathic flavor? High-functioning? You must

consider yourself to be high-functioning, or… perhaps not." Will tilts his head back slightly, and above him is an arched slab of concrete. Will realizes, suddenly, that he misses the sky. "Perhaps you envy your peers for their ability to mask their idiosyncrasies while yours bubble much too close to the surface. You are undeniable, Will." Sky. Open, blue sky. "Your nature is undeniable."

Will Graham closes his eyes, and disappears.

Will is, shockingly to all, and most of all to himself, allowed visitors. Or, maybe he isn't, and Beverly just sneaks past security.

Will tries so hard not to be reliant on others but, God, Bev is a sight for sore eyes. She doesn't smile, or even try to meet his eyes. She just walks in, past the pissing-line, and stands tall, her shoulders squared. "Hi, Will," she says, her voice calm and strong. "The arsonist has gotten bolder," she says and, actually, there's something gentle about her intonation too. Something kind. Beverly has always been kind. "D.C. is burning."

Will smiles bitterly. The D.C. arsonist case was his baby— his and Jack's and the rest of the Behavioral Sciences team. It was a series of perfect, meticulous, passionate crimes. Filed contradictions, impossible to solve. Will never takes pleasure in his work but there were moments— late at night, after hours, sifting through crime scene photos and ash, joking about personal lives and professional lives and the ever-blurring line between the two, moments where Will almost felt like he was part of something. It was kind of nice. Beverly was probably the reason, always inviting Will to after-work-outings, always responding good-naturedly when he turned her down. And now she's on the outside, looking in at Will. Now Will's just another unsolvable case.

"Hello," Will greets her. "Are you here for… consultation?" Will can't imagine that's the case. So much so that it's almost a joke when he asks. Beverly could probably lose her job if she acted on Will's advice— any of Will's advice. Still, there's an inkling of hope audible in his joke. Will realizes now how much he relied on being able to solve other people's problems, in order to avoid considering his own. And now his life… Well, it's both very simple and very complicated. Either way, it's chocked-full of problems. Maybe Beverly's here to help.

"No," she says, almost smiling but not quite. "No, I'm here…" She pauses. She shakes her head, her long black hair shimmering in the fluorescent light. "Honestly, I don't know why I'm here." She looks around the sparse room, looks at the cell Will's kept in; she looks down at the concrete floors, behind her, at the pissing-line. She looks as helpless and defeated as Will feels. "I thought I might get some closure," she says finally and Will's heart, despite all its many 'idiosyncrasies' as Dr. Chilton called them, aches slightly. "I thought…" Beverly, Will notices, flexes her hands briefly before forcing herself to relax. "I mean why'd you do it, Will? Why did you do that?"

Will has nothing he can say to make her understand. He struggles for a moment, grasping at anything in his mind that will convey the urgency, the irony, the reality of the situation.

Nothing comes to him. “I didn’t,” Will mumbles, sounding meek to his own ears. It’s an out of character thing for him to say, even he knows that, but Jesus, he’s hurting. He’s been hurting. Maybe all his life. Will looks up, looks at Beverly’s eyes, though she shies slightly from his gaze. “Are you afraid of me?” Will asks her, sounding more like himself.

Beverly stares him down. She juts out her chin, steels her gaze. “No,” she answers simply.

“Can you do me a favor?”

Beverly scoffs, tilting her head to the side, shifting her gaze upwards, towards the ceiling. She shakes her head slightly, then looks back at Will. “Absolutely *not* ,” she says. “What could you possibly ask of me right now?” she asks, her voice quivering slightly, the only betrayal of her uncertainty. “What position are you in, to be asking for favors?” Her stare is hard-edged, intentional, establishing some kind of dominance. *No need, Beverly,* Will thinks. *I’m the one in the cage. You’re a free agent.* Will averts his eyes, her gaze becoming too much for him. *That’s the position I’m in.*

“I need you to look into ‘Lois’’ background,” Will says, his voice blank and numb. He can’t tell yet, whether or not she’ll do it. Beverly is trustworthy, passionate about her work, and curious to a fault, but she isn’t stupid. “You’ll find everything to be perfectly normal,” Will continues. “No lights, no hits, no bad marks in school. He’ll have gone to school, somewhere prestigious yet private, probably in Europe. No recorded name changes. Clean.”

Beverly stops Will with a raised hand. “Then what’s the point?” she asks, her voice ever so interested and that’s when Will knows— or *hopes* that that will be enough to sway her.

Will smiles. Just a small, private smile, at the horrible truth of it all. “It’ll be too perfect,” Will says, his eyes on Beverly’s boots but his mind somewhere else. “Constructed.” Will sees boxcars painted red with blood. “Staged.” Will sees a corpse strung up in a chapel, the sunlight pouring in through the stained glass and illuminating the gore. “Immaculate.” Will *sees* .

Will looks up suddenly to see Beverly watching him not with concern, but that familiar, dangerous curiosity. She tilts her head, asking a question which Will doesn’t want to answer. “What am I going to find?” she asks, giving that ever so treacherous question breath and, therefore, life.

“Exactly what you’re looking for,” Will answers. Beverly narrows his eyes. “This new serial…” Will starts, careful to avoid accusing ‘Lois’ directly, not wanting to scare Beverly off. “He’s dangerous, Bev.” Beverly smirks, as in, ‘*You think I can’t handle a little danger?’* “He’s deadly,” Will corrects. “When you find him,” Will says, knowing she will, “call for backup.”

In the end, Will’s good advice saves no one.

The first time Will hears news of Beverly, it comes from one of the orderlies, not Jack. Jack, to his credit, arrives with the news quickly but parallel to many aspects of Will's life, it isn't enough. Beverly turns up, slivers of her pinned in glass cases, like a series of intricate, papery butterfly wings. Will vomits in the metal sink in the corner of his cell, and he's grateful he's not stuck in that damned cage. Will sits back on his ass, cringing at the cold concrete floor. Will wipes some bile off his chin and he remembers, even though he's trying desperately not to.

"Gio is missing," Tina whimpers, her bottom lip pushed out and tears rolling down her cheeks in twin rivers. Her shoulders shake and she lets out a painful-sounding cry, collapsing slightly. Will steps forward unthinkingly and catches her in his arms. She clings to him, crying, and Will can't— He isn't there. Will's trousers are rolled up to his calves but they're still soaked, and something's tugging at his line. Something big, Will reels and reels, but still his line is taught with tension and doesn't give. Jesus, this sucker's massive, bigger than the Black Drum Will's father caught in the Outer Banks three summers ago, just pull, Will, pull, and he does, until the line finally reels, that satisfying zip *and drag of the hook as it reels in, and in, and in, until it's on the shore and it's*

Gio's body. Will remembers it in perfect detail.

Gio in her bridal gown, which Will remembers was impossible to chase, hand-sewn and ancient. The trail was long, moth-bitten behind her. Her hands were bound together around the bouquet of red roses, violets, and lilacs. Each with their own meaning, the red and purples pressing against each other attractively. Her mouth gaped open, stuck with wires in the jaw, filled with roses. She was a poem, a piece of art, immaculate design. She was so, so beautiful and it hurt Will's stomach to look at, but he saw it. He saw the shining creation as it was intended— A birdcage for a chest and a flower garden for a tongue, you had nothing yourself and still— *it was not enough.* Will swallows, vomit rising in his throat once again.

Where am I? Will wonders, that age-old question piercing his brainstem once again. *Where am I? What day is it? Who am I?* There was an answer to those questions, a long time ago, a lifetime ago. But now, Will is alone and no one is here to hold him. Will is alone. But Will is still Will. *My name is Will Graham,* Will remembers. *I am going to kill Hannibal Lecter.*

Chapter End Notes

GAH! Sorry for the world's slowest update. Spring break + midterms kicked my ass. But the only way out is through and I am nearly there. This is my liferaft so I hope you all enjoy reading!

CHAPTER V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack does visit Will eventually, with the news of two new bodies. Beverly, and a local dog-walker with a familiar route around D.C. The dog-walker was shredded, gutted, taken apart, a sloppy recreation of Will's 'victims'. Almost good enough for Jack, the Behavioral Science team, the courts. Almost, but it still isn't enough. Parole is still off the table. Judge Davies still won't look at his case. Alana sends Will updates about his dogs through Jack, but does so surreptitiously, and Jack relays them without speaking Alana's name. Jack says a lot actually, without actually saying very much. He tells Will that there's no chance for him with his meager, pitiful greeting. ("Hey, Will. How are you doing, man?") He tells Will that Beverly's dead with a long pause before he speaks. ("… I'm sorry.") He apologizes with news about Winston. ("He's everyone's favorite. Your students still ask about him.") He remains silent, when Will asks why he's here.

Finally, Will repeats himself. "Why are you here, Jack?"

Jack swallows, looks around uncomfortably. He folds his hands in front of him, clasping them in a way that makes him look like a solemn funeral director and, really, Jack hasn't changed since Will met him. He's ever so serious about delivering bad news, and when there's good news… Well, there's never really good news around here. But when there is, Jack delivers it just as solemnly. With just as much reserved, self-appointed responsibility. Finally, Jack opens his mouth, making an honest attempt at holding Will's eye, and speaks, "I need your help with Beverly's case."

And Will is struck by the extreme surreality of a case with Beverly's name in front of it. Grief is so, so strange to Will. A beast he's known all his life, that he's never quite identified the shape of. Something soft and sharp all at once, with feathers, surely.

Will closes his eyes and imagines the inky black feathers rustling under his rough palm.

"—to me, Will. I need your help," Jack's saying, trying to get Will's attention. Will blinks the illusion away. He's back in his cell. Will feels like he's always been in this cell. "I need your help," Jack repeats, perhaps for the one millionth time. "I want you to look over the photos, read through Freddie Lounds' testimony—"

"Lounds found her?" Will interrupts. The fact actually turns Will's stomach. *Of course,* he thinks to himself. Who else? Hannibal's speaking his own language so clearly, a language whose translations elude Jack, the Behavioral Sciences team, Homicide, but not Will. Will understands fluently what each stroke of Hannibal's blade signifies. Hannibal has been writing letters like this to Will since he was very, very young. It's as terrifying as it is familiar. "Is she alright?" Will asks, meaning Freddie. No one is safe from Hannibal. Everyone is a pawn or, worse, prey.

“What?” Jack frowns. “Of course. She’s seen worse, anyways.” Jack squints at Will, trying to get a read. Perhaps Jack has never seen Will so afraid before. Or, for that matter, afraid at all. But Jack carries on, “I want you to tell me who it is, Will. Who’s hunting us?”

That’s when Will chuckles. It’s a dry, humorless sound that echoes throughout the empty space. “I told you,” Will answers, his voice just as empty as his laugh. *I told you before you ever thought to ask.* “I told you, I can’t help while I’m inside,” is what Will ends up saying; he’s good, and restrained that way. *A good boy* . Will shakes his head violently, doesn’t care what Jack thinks of that, just needs to physically loosen the thought from its place lodged inside Will’s mind. “I can’t, Jack,” Will whispers, not sure exactly what it is he can’t do.

When Will finally lifts his head to look at Jack, Jack is watching him closely, his face all painted with concern and curiosity, and something a little darker. Desire to wind Will up, perhaps. Until he falls right the fuck apart. “I, um…” Will starts but his throat clicks with lack of moisture. He swallows and tries again: “I knew this girl, my last year of high school.” Will can still see her *perfectly* . He closes his eyes and sees her, laughing, smiling, fixing her hair. Her, breathing, shining brightly. Her, *living* . She was everything. She was… “She was my friend.” Will smiles a small, sweet smile at the memory of her. Some days, the memory of her is *so vivid* . But on those days, the memories of her corpse shine just as bright. “Il Mostro killed her. Put her in a bridal gown, strung her up in a chapel. Gutted her.” It’s very simple, actually, to recount everything exactly the way it happened. “That was the last time I investigated the death of someone I knew.” Will opens his eyes. Jack holds Will’s gaze, just for a second, before Will looks away.

Jack’s hands shift slightly, rasping softly in the quiet room. “You are the only person Beverly would trust with this…” Jack trails off into the unspoken, *If she were alive.*

Will lets Jack off the hook. He’s a good (*boy*) guy, like that. Will nods, solemnly, once. “ *Alright* ,” Will says softly and Jack smiles slightly, a reserved, triumphant smile. Jack wins. But really, there are no winners in this game. No winners except those left at the table, feasting on everybody else. Will’s not sure yet, whether he wins, or ends up on the plate.

Beverly’s file is hard to look at, and tells Will what he already knew. Confident killer, experienced white male in his late 30’s or early 40’s, still spry and strong, not afraid of law enforcement, will kill again. Will thinks about names while he looks over the file. *Lois Mort.* A name can be a cheap smokescreen to cover up the farce of a disappearing act. *Il Mostro.* A name can inspire terror in all those who hear it. *Hannibal Lecter.* A name can be a memory. A body rose from its grave. A promise. Will remembers a promise he heard once, a long time ago.

“They reunite.”

Judge Davies goes missing on a Friday evening. When the courts open up the following Monday, his body is found quickly. Strung up in the courtroom. Immaculate. It's only a matter of time before Will is released. Between Beverly and the judge, it's become clear to everyone involved that Will is just another victim of some greater scheme at play. Will's sure… He's *sure* that Hannibal would expect a 'thank you' from Will in regards to the judge's death. The thought, just as surely as Beverly's file, makes Will's stomach turn over on itself.

It takes some time for Will to be cleared of his charges. And in between days when Will talks to the ghost of Beverly, and days when Will talks to himself, and days when Will is silent, an orderly visits Will. The orderly is psychotically fixated on Will. Will could practically smell it on him when he first walked past Will's cell, mopping the floor. The orderly had glanced furtively at Will, over and over again, counting each time Will swallowed, each time Will tilted his head back against the back wall of his cell and stared at the ceiling, each time Will's right hand trigger finger twitched. It unnerved Will, slightly but surely. It unnerved Will, not because he was afraid of the orderly (Will's fears are much more pressing than simple death at the hands of a scrawny asylum worker) but because he sensed an… affection within the orderly.

His name, Will learns, is Matthew.

He isn't unattractive. Despite his scrawny build and mousy face, and his dull brown hair which hangs in his beady, black eyes, he maintains something aloof and handsome in the jaw, in the way his throat flexes as he swallows. Will watches him just as closely as he watches Will.

Today, they dare to speak to each other.

The orderly approaches Will's cell cautiously, slowly, as if he reveres Will or something. When he struggles to meet Will's eye, Will stands, taking a step forward and meeting the orderly at the bars of his cell.

The orderly speaks without looking up, except to glance furtively and excitedly at Will's face. "I'm—" he begins.

Will interrupts: "A serial killer."

The orderly smiles sharply, exposing sharp incisors and coffee stains. "I'm an orderly." Will's a little won over by that— the overt frankness of 'I am…' statements, the way which people sometimes declare themselves, unraveling their idiosyncrasies and getting to the heart of the issue. "Or, at least, I pass as one." The kid lifts his chin slightly, exposing his dark eyes and Will likes him a little bit less. "It's easy. Keep your head down. Do your work. Slaughter a few sheep every other weekend." *Oh,* Will thinks. "You could do it— once you get out. If

you're good, they'll never know you were *in* ." Will realizes Matthew's understanding of the situation. Will Graham is, in Matthew's eyes, a prolific serial killer who only got caught after that pesky crime of passion— stalking Dr. Mort. What a shame. Another great behind bars. Another monster pulled over on a speeding ticket. Will resists the urge to roll his eyes. This is not an honest man, a declarative, get-to-the-heart-of-things man. This is a man with a mistaken sense of priority over other people. "Friends are the trickiest part," he continues and Will doesn't want to hear it, but listens anyway, convincing himself that this will be good for him, in the long run. "You need them if you ever want an alibi but most of your options are going to be sheep or otherwise moronic. Every once in a while, though…" Matthew grins in a repellent manner. "You meet someone who's more than just prey." God, this poor kid is mistaken. Matthew continues, speaking quickly now, "I killed that dog-walker for you. To try and get you out. Not the judge, though," he adds, confirming Will's suspicions. "That was someone else."

Yes, Will wants to answer, *I'm familiar with his work.* Instead, though, Will smiles his best impression of a sickening, shark-like grin. "Would you like to be friends, Matthew?" Will asks and he already knows the answer. *Yes, please,* Matthew Brown is going to say, like a good boy.

Will doesn't see Matthew the next day. Or the day after that. On the third day, Jack marches in.

"What did you *do* ?" he demands, before he's even in Will's eyeline, walking briskly into the room, past the pissing-line, right up to the bars of Will's cell. Will blinks guilelessly, not even bothering to respond. "Fine, you wanna play the silent-and-stupid game?" Jack asks rhetorically when Will refuses to take the bait. "I just fended off an attack on Lois' life. Explain that to me." Jack's breath comes in harshly and his eyes pierce Will with a fiery anger. Will has never seen Jack this mad. "I knew you were dangerous, Will," Jack continues, his voice not so gravelly or furious as before, but the anger still burning bright and obvious within him. "But not like this. Not to anyone but yourself." *That was enough for you?* Will wonders, but doesn't dare to ask out loud. When Jack speaks, his voice is quieter. Not calm, but disappointed: "Maybe that was my mistake." Jack sighs. "I knew you were coming out of a harsh childhood, Will, and I knew it bothered you. I knew before you ever got taken off the force, that it was affecting you." *That's rich,* Will thinks as Jack remains solemn and upset. *You don't know me, Jack. I am an island, yet undiscovered.* Will thinks of his little home in Wolf Trap— a ship at sea, a spot of light, passing by. Omitting that strange light, as if calling out, *Know me, know me, know me* , and, yet, unknowable. "And still, I— Well, I thought I was *leading* you." *Leading me,* Will thinks. *Into the night, Jack. Into the deep blue, into the black.* "Maybe you were leading me all along."

Will isn't sure what to say. In a time of so much darkness, how could Will possibly begin to illuminate Jack's life with the truth? How can Will's little ship light reach all the way across this black sea of Hannibal, all-encompassing *Hannibal* . Will is powerless. So Will says nothing.

“He’s fine by the way. Lois. He’s fine. I got to him before the orderly did.” Will pictures that: Jack fending off scrawny Matthew Brown, cutting ropes from around Hannibal’s wrists, freeing him from whatever elaborate and un-clever trap Matthew has set and aiding him with an arm around the waist as Hannibal limps to safety. “Lois had an alibi for Beverly’s time of death. His dinner-party came back venison. He isn’t a suspect, Will.”

“Then why’d you test the meat?” Those are the first words Will has spoken in three days, and his voice croaks.

Jack takes pause. He glances around Will’s face, obviously trying to get a read on him. Is Will vengeful? Psychotic? Clairvoyant? Will Jack ever know? Will tries to project some kind of authentic, sure expression in his face. He isn’t sure it works, but something shifts in the arrangement of Jack’s eyebrows and he tucks his hands behind his back, presumably clasping them together reasonably. “It’s serial,” Jack admits quietly, as if it’s a great concession and a thrown-bone all at once. Will closes his eyes. He can hear it in Hannibal’s voice. *It is a serial killer, Will,* he says in that slightly-thick-around-the-edges accented speech, telling Will gently, making it easy, never once clueing Will into the fact that it was *him all along.* But this time, Will knows. He knows. He’s so sure. Hannibal is playing everyone like a fucking fiddle.

Everyone but Will.

Finally, Jack speaks. He gifts Will with a small mercy: “It’s serial,” he says. So serial, Will will discover later, that in that exact moment, as Jack and Will face each other, separated only by a set of bars and a web of lies, Freddie Lounds pecks away at the keyboard of her sleek, silver laptop, christening Hannibal Lecter a new name, a new identity to hide behind. An homage to the nomenclature of a bygone era. The memory of the past and a shimmering glimpse into the future. The name of someone who will kill again. She names him something appropriately grotesque:

The Ripper.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry !!! Longest accidental haitus ever. I can't promise I'm back just yet as I am working through finals currently but sweet, sweet summer break is just around the corner and updates will be more regular then. I love you all so dearly, thank you for bearing with me. I hope this update holds you over until I'm able to write consistently again.

CHAPTER VI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Ripper, it turns out, is Will's ticket to the rest of his life, his re-entry to the real world, his freedom. The Ripper framed Will, killed the judge, and, much to Will's surprise and disgust, kidnapped a young F.B.I. recruit, one of Jack's, and hid her away in Dr. Chilton's basement. Bound and gagged in the wine cellar, Jesus Christ. Will heard she chewed through the ropes. Will isn't sure if that was Hannibal's intention for her, or if he had some elaborately cruel scheme to release her in time, and her bravery was a deviation from his plan. Will hopes it was her bravery, and not Hannibal, that saved her.

Either way, she's saved. And so is Will. He takes a deep breath in and is so *endlessly* grateful for the smell of the traffic, the wind, the grass, which grows in the hospital's pathetic attempt at a garden. There are sounds of cars rushing past, birds and squirrels somewhere in the distance, chirping. Will is almost hesitant to climb into Jack's company car— the big, black SUV— and miss out on the smell of the outside air. But Will remembers his dogs and, admittedly, Alana. Will is looking forward to seeing Alana (nearly) just as much as the dogs, despite himself and their estrangement. He runs mental hands over these spiky thought patterns in his mind as Jack drives him back to Wolf Trap, Will still wearing the stiff release-standard jeans and scratchy t-shirt. He does want to see Alana again, despite everything between them. He makes an attempt to honor the complex truths at play:

Alana cannot be allowed to become too close to Will, as it only puts her at risk.

Alana must understand how grateful Will is for her friendship the past years and for taking care of his rescues.

Alana has to know the truth about Hannibal as soon as possible.

Alana will not believe anything Will says without proper evidence.

Alana has good instincts and must know something is wrong.

Alana will act bravely as soon as she realizes something's wrong.

Bravery gets you killed.

Just ask Beverly.

Will shakes his head at the nasty thought. He doesn't want to think that way; it leads nowhere. Nowhere good. So Will turns his head and cranes his neck slightly, looking up at the sky through the passenger side window. He had expected an ominous, gray-scale overcast to have taken over the world, foreshadowing the trouble to come. But the sky shines an uncharacteristically bright blue, the sun beaming down at Will, a few puffy white clouds clinging to the horizon. Will blinks. It's not any brighter out here than it was in the visiting

cell, but somehow the vibrancy of the world hurts Will's eyes anyways. Will is looking forward to seeing Alana. Maybe that's the most important thing.

As soon as Will is reunited with his dogs, literally as they lick and nuzzle at his face and neck, while he is crouched on the ground to scritch behind their ears and pet their soft, well-groomed coats (thanks, Alana), Jack steps away to take a phone call.

Will looks up at Alana, who stands slightly more than a respectful distance away, her hands clasped in front of her, frowning prettily. When she sees him looking at her, she arranges her face into something pleasantly neutral. She takes a step forward and Will stands, aware that he's covered in dog hair and wiping fruitlessly at his awkward prison-pants. Will finds himself feeling slightly embarrassed, a feeling which triggers an uncomfortable self-awareness that Will could do without. He knows what he looks like.

A mess.

And it isn't just his looks— Will's life is horrifically and morbidly messy. Will's life is a bear trap poised to close, its teeth shiny and sharp. Alana pretends not to notice any of this, and moves to hug him. Will almost steps back, almost has the good sense to stop her from getting close, but in the end he opens his arms and envelopes her in a firm hold.

"I'm so sorry, I never…" she begins lowly and, without meaning to, Will murmurs a quiet shushing sound, cutting her off. He presses, squeezing her once, twice, letting go.

"*Thank you*," Will says, his voice coming out sheepish as he notices the slight pink in Alana's cheeks. Alana bites her lip and Will looks at the ground. The dogs swarm him curiously. Will nods his head foolishly at them, *Yes, I'm an idiot,* Will communicates silently with them. *I am a little bit in love with Alana. I can't help it.* Jack returns from his phone call with an elusive look in his eye, nods his head back towards the car, parked down Will's long and winding driveway.

"Miriam Lass would like to meet with you, Will," Jack says, his voice nearly pleased. Will processes the words slowly. *Miriam Lass,* Will thinks. A kidnap victim belonging, allegedly, to Dr. Chilton. Having been held underground for under 30 days, she emerged from her trauma resilient. In the past week, she has been sent home from the hospital and is currently staying with her parents, who flew into Baltimore a few days ago. Her testimony against Dr. Chilton was instrumental in Will's release. *Would like to meet with you*. Will feels something sickly stir in his stomach at that. It's clear why Hannibal took Miriam and it's clear now, to Will, why she has been released.

For Will.

It's all for Will.

Hannibal's language of love letters persists, this time in the form of bodies, living and un-living. Haunting Will all the same. Will read Miriam's case file, and spoke to Jack about her.

Will sees so much of himself in her, even in his limited understanding of what makes her up. She was young for her class, proud of her work, and ready to prove herself. To Jack. She wanted to prove herself to Jack. Will identifies strongly with her and, even so, recognizes that this is exactly what Hannibal wants. Miriam is everything Will could have been. Will is everything Miriam is afraid of becoming. They are dark reflections of each other and it's Hannibal holding up the mirror. *Look, Will,* the letter reads, *I will destroy even the best version of you. No one is safe. I will take you and reshape you until you are born anew. No one is safe. Miriam Lass will never be the same. No one can be saved.*

Jack is looking at Will expectantly and Will shakes his head, realizing he hasn't spoken in several seconds and the resultant silence hangs awkwardly in the air. Alana takes a step forward and Will turns his head slightly, looking just past his shoulder. She's so close. Will turns his head back, this time looking down at the ground, almost bashful. Alana touches Will's elbow gently, a gesture that could be read as flirtatious if it were coming from anyone else. As it is, the touch is comforting, though painfully platonic.

"I think it's a great idea for the two of you to meet," Alana says cheerfully, though the brightness in her voice is clearly measured.

Will forces his face into a neutral smile, though he probably looks strange, and perhaps pained. "Okay," Will says. Avoiding Miriam won't save her. Or Will. The only way out of Hannibal's trap is through. "I'll meet with Miriam."

Miriam Lass is surprisingly small. Will feels awkward and slightly guilty for entering the room— a tiny, unused office at the F.B.I. headquarters which is coated in a fine layer of dust, with his gaze fixed in the middle-distance, where he expects Miriam's head to be. He looks down quickly, briefly making eye contact before fixing his gaze on her forehead. She can't be more than 5'2". She *stands* tall, though, with her back straight and shoulders squared, her arms crossed and her chin pushed slightly out, as if waiting for a challenge. Academy must've been hell for her.

"Hi," Will says softly. Miriam had quickly flicked her gaze towards him the second he entered the room, but made no move towards him or otherwise acknowledged his presence. "I'm Will Graham," he says. "I'm a friend of Jack's," Will thinks to add, then realizes quickly he's fallen back on old habits; *establishing rapport.* Miriam cuts her eyes to the waistband of Will's jeans, likely looking for a firearm and finding none.

"I thought you were an agent," she says quietly, a wariness audible in her voice.

"Sort of," Will admits. "Used to be." It does feel like an admission. Confession.

Miriam nods, looks around the room. Someone's accommodation is left, hung up on the wall, glares down at them, angry at being forgotten. There's a set of filing cabinets pressed against one wall, a wooden desk and chair crammed into the corner, crowded with files, also left behind, and an ugly brown rug on the floor, crushed between all the furniture. Will is struck by the irony of the situation; that he should be allowed to meet, unsupervised, with a young

woman, in close quarters nonetheless. Everyone who knows Will believed, at some point, that he was guilty. Now everyone believes he's innocent. Belief, it seems, is malleable, and subject to change. And Will is prone to falling victim to its shifting dunes. "Jack didn't tell me much about you," Miriam says, pulling Will to the surface of his deep pool of thought, out of it, back into the cold, real world. She's sat back against the desk, perched like she's ready to make a run for it at any moment. "Just that you got pinned for a lot of his crimes," she says, her voice measured and even. Will notices, though, that she avoids saying *his* name. Chilton's, presumably. That's whose house she was found in. That's who Hannibal plucked out of oblivion and pinned to the wall by his limbs, isn't it? *Poor Chilton*, Will thinks again. "He didn't say it, but I'm pretty sure my escape turned your release into a rush-job. They couldn't get you out of that asylum fast enough."

Will looks up at Miriam. "Thank you," he says earnestly.

Miriam catches his gaze with wide, fearful eyes. Her irises are a bright, piercing blue, with flecks of a pale seafoam green towards her pupil. When her eyes widen, her irises look remarkably like the ocean. She is very beautiful and so, so young. Will's heart aches for all those who Hannibal has sought to destroy, dismantle, and break down. Will doesn't know how he and Miriam managed to survive it. "I didn't mean—" Miriam begins but Will holds a hand up. He doesn't need her to dilute her escape down to something meaningless. She survived. She is strong. Miriam looks down and folds her hands in front of her, then unfolds them and brings her hand to her mouth. She begins gnawing on her thumbnail nervously. She mutters something which is muffled by her hand and Will leans forward slightly. She repeats herself, this time pulling her hand away from her face and speaking clearly: "I thought you might be able to tell me why he let me go."

The words seem to change the air pressure in the room.

Will isn't sure where to start. Really, the story stretches far back, past 1993. It begins with Hannibal's dark past, something for which no words exist in the English language, someone who lives on only in Hannibal's memory, in whispered Lithuanian, late at night. It begins with Hannibal's pain. It will end with Will's, Miriam's, Beverly's, (*Gio's*). It will end. Will opens his mouth to speak, say anything, but struggles. He wants to tell her that the worst 30 days of her life will not hold a candle to the forest fire of her joyful freedom. He wants to tell her that she will fucking *survive this*. Instead, he begins, "Whatever you experienced… Whatever is haunting you…" Will trails off, thinking, admittedly, about his own ghosts. "You can tell me about it," he finishes. It's a clunky, awkward phrasing, much too close to the core of what Will's asking, which is, of course, *'What did you see?'* What did you see, Miriam Lass? And that, of course, is a work-around way of asking, *What does Hannibal want to tell me?*

Miriam blinks. She wanted an answer; she was met with another question. Will remembers how it felt: getting out. For the first few months of life after Hannibal, Will felt like his life was only questions, all the answers stripped away and leaving him raw, exposed. He was a tender, open nerve ending to the world, each word out of his mouth a fearful, hopeful question. And always, met with another question. A lack of closure. More open. More nerve. Will never expected to see himself on the other side of that interchange. He thought when he grew up, he might be the one with the answers. Miriam swallows, collecting herself, which

gives Will hope that *she* might be able to illuminate Will's life. She opens her mouth, forming a petite 'o' shape before folding her lips into a thin line. She swallows again.

"It's alright," Will says softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "It's okay." The words must be so meaningless to Miriam— they were to Will.

But then, no, they must mean *something.* She closes her eyes and speaks: "I saw bright, white light. So bright, it… It hurt to look at. It made everything around it blurry and… messed up." A tear rolls down her cheek and she grips the desk on either side of her hips, her knuckles turning white with pressure. "A pillar of white light. It was almost… It *lorded* over me." She gasps slightly and Will moves forward to stop her from continuing but, without seeing him, she holds up her hand to keep him where he is. Will stills himself. She's telling her story. Will won't interrupt her. "And there was this voice— *his* voice. So loud. Or— not loud. *Inside my head*." Will closes his eyes too. *Your name is Will Graham,* he hears, reverberating around in his skull. *Your name is Will Graham.* Will shakes his head, chokes on his own spit. He swallows a cough and forces himself to take a deep breath. It doesn't make any sense. Will has heard Hannibal's voice in real life since 1994 and sustained it— survived it. But still, Hannibal's voice as it exists in Will's head is so overwhelming, so all-encompassing, it makes Will want to *die.* It lords over him. "Chilton's voice."

That breaks Will out of his reverie. He almost says, out loud, *'That wasn't Chilton.'* But he stops himself. This is Miriam's story and, really, it's her *question*. Will only wants to speak if he has an answer. "When I first started out fishing," Will begins, conjuring up a mental image of himself at that age: scrawny, even for a six year old. Just below hip height of his mother, above the knee of his father, who seemed to tower over him, blocking out the sun. Will remembers the weight of his first catch in his little balled up fist. "I kept every fish I caught. I was so proud of even the tiniest mackerel, I would gut the thing with my pocket knife. I was so proud." Miriam does not move, waiting patiently for Will's point. Will continues, "When I got older, I learned that, when you're waiting for the big catch, you don't want to load up your icebox with six-inchers. In fact, you would only keep them as bait." Will frowns at that. The word 'bait.' He doesn't want to… *reduce* Miriam… He merely wants to show her what Hannibal tried to reduce her to— the very nature of what she survived. "The bait goes back in the ocean." 'Bait' is a nasty word. But to get into Hannibal's mind is to dive headfirst into the core of human capacity for ugliness. For all things inhuman.

"Who is it?" Miriam pipes up, her voice breaking the silence like a diver's head breaching the surface of the water as she comes up for air.

Will blinks.

Miriam makes an expression that indicates that she would roll her eyes if she were ten years younger. She elaborates: "*Who*—" and with the next question, the next in the long and painful series which makes up Will's life, Will's stomach drops, "Who is he hunting?"

Your name is Will Graham.

I am going to

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Will wakes up several hours later, laying in his bed in Wolf Trap, his eyes already open when his vision returns.

Will turns on his side, and vomits.

The decently polite but slightly-gruff doctor at St. Joseph's chalks the episode up to severe CPTSD. Jack tells Will it isn't that— that Will must not be sleeping well, that they weren't feeding him right at Baltimore State Hospital, that Will's got a good head on his shoulders. Will sits in Jack's office uncomfortably, though he knew by the time his appointment was over— hell, he knew the second he woke up in his bed after the episode, that he can't get out of this unscathed. Will knew and is, therefore, not surprised when Jack tells him he's mandated another six weeks of sessions. Will does have a realization in that moment, however. The only way out of Hannibal's plan is *through* . "Can I request my own therapist?" Will asks, the shape of a plan forming in his mind. "From a pool of the Bureau's recommendations, of course." Jack's eyebrows twitch slightly and he shifts behind his desk. Will hopes that tacked on concession won't throw a wrench in his plans but will, instead, sway Jack just enough in Will's direction that he concedes.

Jack nods his head once only.

Will purses his lips slightly. Then, he says his next words very carefully, measuring each word out to be relaxed and calm: "I want to see Dr. Lois Mort."

Chapter End Notes

Wow! A lot of life-stuff has been happening that has made writing a necessary escape. I'm struggling to get to the next chapter of my life after losing my scholarship for college. It's been a lot of goodbyes lately. That being said, this story and all your very

lovely comments have been a massive and much-needed relief. I hope you enjoy this update and I'll do my best to be speedy with the next one. (Also I hope you guys don't mind how much I overshare in the notes, ha ha. This is my journal for sure LOL.)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!